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RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO IMMEDIATE 2959  
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE 3500  
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FROM REGIONAL REFCOORD AMMAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/21/2017  
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#) [JO](#)  
SUBJECT: LOCAL UNHCR OFFICIALS APPEAL FOR HELP ON IRAQIS

REF: A. AMMAN 726

[¶](#)B. AMMAN 679 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: UNHCR officials in Jordan and Syria warn that the surge of Iraqis approaching their offices is starting to overtax their capacity. Even with increased staff and resources, UNHCR Jordan was forced to turn away hundreds of Iraqis seeking to register on February 19 so it could focus on meeting referral goals set by their HQ in Geneva. Iraqis seeking to register with UNHCR in Syria are now receiving appointments to start the process in late December. These local UNHCR officials fear that disappointed applicants could start to react violently given that Iraqis in this region are registering under the mistaken belief that UNHCR is implementing a new "first come, first serve" sign-up system to identify the 7,000 Iraqis who will be resettled to the U.S. They have been appealing to UNHCR HQ in Geneva to establish a new communications strategy targeting the local Iraqi community. UNHCR Jordan is also requesting authorization to hire additional staff. END SUMMARY.

CROWDS APPROACHING UNHCR CONTINUE TO GROW

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[¶](#)2. (SBU) The phenomenon of thousands of Iraqis approaching UNHCR offices in the region is gaining momentum (reftels). UNHCR's Syria Representative Laurens Jolles reports that 7,000 Iraqis approached their offices in Damascus on February 18 -- up from 5,000 on February 11. UNHCR Jordan Representative Rob Breen estimates that as many as 1,000 Iraqis approached his Amman office on February 19, approximately twice the number they received the week prior.

UNHCR OFFICES REACHING SATURATION POINT

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[¶](#)3. (SBU) Both national offices reported that tensions are high among the crowds at their offices. To help defuse them, UNHCR officials in Syria and Jordan have tried to ensure that every Iraqi who approaches their office is either immediately registered or is given an appointment to complete registration (ref A). However, UNHCR's capacity to maintain this sort of real time registration processing is reaching the saturation point. Even after increasing staffing and

introducing rapid training programs, UNHCR's Jordan Representative has concluded that his office can no longer process all of the new applicants who present themselves at their offices on any given day and also meet the referral targets UNHCR's HQ in Geneva is setting.

¶4. (C) On February 19, for example, approximately 200 of the estimated 1,000 Iraqis who approached UNHCR in Jordan were given appointments for April to start the registration process (at which time they will be registered if they are from south- or central- Iraq and have not committed an excludable offense). UNHCR Jordan estimated that it turned away an additional 800 Iraqis without appointments, instructing them to start the process again later in the week. Breen (strictly protect) told refcoo on February 20 that he has appealed to UNHCR HQ in Geneva for increased staff to expand registration hours and also meet new referral targets, and was informed that he would be replaced with another representative more capable of utilizing existing resources. Apart from the need to maintain referral work, Breen has argued that UNHCR risks security incidents if it opts to undertake registration with untrained staff (such as drivers or secretaries) or lower-paid UN volunteers, as UNHCR is currently doing in Syria (see para 7).

#### UNHCR FEARS NEW REGISTRATION SYSTEM COULD SPARK VIOLENCE

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¶5. (SBU) The 800 Iraqis who were turned away by UNHCR in Jordan yesterday (with the support of local police) went home peacefully. However, UNHCR officials in Amman are concerned that frustration levels will reach a breaking point due to their mistaken understanding of the registration process. Breen reported that the Iraqi community in Jordan is laboring under a mistaken belief that they will be granted immediate U.S. resettlement. He claimed there are local media reports which suggest that UNHCR is implementing a "first come, first serve" sign-up system for the U.S. to identify the 7,000 Iraqis who will be admitted to USRAP this year as a contributing factor. Breen noted that Iraqis who were recognized as refugees prior to 2007 believe they are being bypassed by this system; a few have staged peaceful protests outside UNHCR's Amman offices, displaying their case numbers on banners. Breen added that the GOJ had already convoked UNHCR for introducing registration policies that resulted in crowds that were only half the size that UNHCR is currently seeing (ref B). Breen fears that any security incident could have a severe impact on UNHCR's ability to continue registration in Jordan, given that the GOJ is still contesting the UN's legal right to do so under its current MOU.

#### UNHCR JORDAN PROPOSES JOINT COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

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¶6. (SBU) Breen confirmed that UNHCR is standing up a new communications effort to counter misunderstanding about UNHCR's referrals to the USG. UNHCR is printing additional pamphlets explaining the UNHCR registration process to ensure that all Iraqis who approach their offices receive a copy. UNHCR is also working with its Geneva HQ to target local media. Breen requested that Embassy Amman join those efforts by issuing a statement to counter alleged local media reports that suggest that our decision to admit 7,000 Iraqis to USRAP in 2007 is a program exclusively for Iraqis in Jordan. In addition to tempering expectations on the numbers of Iraqis who will be referred to USRAP from Jordan, Breen appealed for U.S. officials to reinforce that referral to the USRAP is a staged process, and that UNHCR cannot secure immediate admission to the U.S.

#### SYRIA REGISTRATION ALSO UNSUSTAINABLE

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¶7. (SBU) UNHCR's representative in Syria told refcoo on February 19 that Iraqis are also registering in Damascus under the mistaken belief that they are signing up for a

guaranteed, fast track admissions program to the U.S. Laurens Jolles has requested UNHCR HQ's permission to hire a full time communications specialist to help raise local understanding of refugee registration and limited chance of third country referral. Jolles warned that UNHCR registration practices in Damascus could also become a flashpoint. As reported in ref A, Jolles has tried to maintain a system in Damascus where 100 percent of Iraqis who approach UNHCR on any given day are either directly registered or are given registration appointments (to accomplish this, Jolles has diverted all of his staff, including drivers and secretaries, to support registration activities). Jolles told refcoord that the potential for Iraqis to turn violent remains "extremely high," in his view, but maintaining same-day service is simply not sustainable. He explained that UNHCR has nearly exhausted all of its appointments for 2007. Within two weeks, UNHCR will start scheduling initial registration appointments for 2008. At current rates, registration appointments could be booked through 2013 by June. UNHCR will have to "review its registration practices within weeks," Jolles concluded.

**¶8. (C) COMMENT:** We disagree with UNHCR's Amman office that additional USG public statements over our resettlement strategy can reduce the size of the crowds appearing at their offices; it is the informal Iraqi community information networks and the rumors they purvey which will determine that. Further public USG statements no matter how carefully worded will likely only serve to increase attention to the USG locally and thereby attract greater crowds to UNHCR. We also believe that the GoJ is fully capable of handling security at UNHCR's Amman office and its environs, and that the GoJ is committed to discharging its responsibilities to protect diplomatic and international organization facilities.

The GOJ has performed such tasks exceptionally for other diplomatic customers over many years (e.g., the Danish cartoon crisis, the various watershed events of violence in the West Bank/Gaza during both Intifada's, etc.). We do, however, share the local concern that UNHCR, despite significant and rapid plus ups in staffing, may have reached saturation point. UNHCR's inability to quickly process all of the Iraqis who approach their offices in Jordan causes crowds to line the streets around their offices, poses a potential security threat and keeps the spotlight on registration practices that the GoJ considers controversial. While we do not wish to second guess UNHCR HQ's management or staffing decisions, we believe that UNHCR's Jordan representative understands GoJ sensitivities, and suspect that his request for additional resources may be necessary to meet the targets UNHCR HQ is setting.

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